

Book review: Political Protest in Contemporary Africa

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Book review

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Mueller, Lisa (2018), *Political Protest in Contemporary Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, ISBN 978-1-108-438-254 (hardback), 272 pages

Large-scale protests in a number of countries of sub-Saharan Africa have drastically increased since the years 2010–2011. A publication that looks at current trends in the social movements unfolding across sub-Saharan Africa, explaining the causes and the timing of them, seems thus timely.

In her book *Political Protest in Contemporary Africa*, Lisa Mueller analyses how the current protests in Africa are related to movements in earlier decades, who leads the current protests, and how ordinary people are mobilised to join them. While chapters 1, 2, and 3 define key concepts and situate the phenomenon in the wider context of the economic and political development of Africa, chapter 4 looks at the leaders of protests and chapter 5 uses quantitative data to show what motivates people to participate therein. Niger's protests movements are analysed in-depth in chapter 6, meanwhile. The concluding chapter 7 also contains policy recommendations.

Mueller argues in chapters 1 and 2 that the recent protests constitute a third wave of social movements in sub-Saharan Africa. The first wave of the 1950s and 1960s led to decolonisation, while the second wave of protests in the 1990s induced political and economic liberalisation. Mueller's core argument, then, is that social inequalities form the basis of the current protests; she sees them as caused mainly by internal factors. She thus rejects the common understanding that the current protests in sub-Saharan Africa were originally inspired by the Arab Spring. Contrary to the popular hypothesis of North–South contagion, Mueller argues that the new middle class in African countries was unsatisfied with the possibilities for political participation and therefore mobilised poor people around their materialist grievances to push for democratic reform. Mueller hence rejects a second prominent hypothesis that explains contemporary protests as simple “bread riots.” Instead, coalitions between the middle class and the poor, as well as the predominantly urban-based occurrence of protests, set the third wave thereof apart from earlier ones.

In chapter 3, the author describes the general context of the current protest wave. Despite impressive gross domestic product growth rates, income distribution is extremely uneven in African societies. Stark poverty and limited chances for political



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participation still exist, notwithstanding the master narrative of African lions on the move. Nevertheless, decades of prosperity would facilitate the ascendancy of a new middle class that has reaped the benefits from the economic liberalisation of the 1990s, while the old one owed its existence to the state sector. Mueller finds that this new middle class is not afraid to speak out against authoritarian rule, because it is less dependent on the state for its well-being. Chapter 4 analyses what makes protest leaders successful in organising movements, using Senegal as a case study. Mueller shows that there protest leaders adopted a very successful dual strategy of thrusting forward “democracy *and* economic justice” (113, italics in the original) in order to mobilise also the poor.

Chapter 5 comprises the quantitative part of the book. The author tests several hypotheses for deprivation and mobilisation with survey data from Afrobarometer, for thirty-one countries (2002–2015). Based on her statistical analysis, Mueller finds that people are more likely to join protests if the prospects of moving up the social ladder are perceived to be slim. People are also more likely to participate if they perceive their ethnic group as being disadvantaged. Declining living standards in the past also now drive people to take part. Mueller provides further qualitative evidence from protest movements in Niger during the period 2009–2010, in chapter 6. Based on 300 interviews, she shows that the most important factor motivating people to join protest movements was economic in nature.

In her concluding chapter, Mueller charts some policy formulations. She argues for a less state-centric approach within the development community. Instead, the development community should support protest movements via a range of financial and technical means to enable them to reform states from within.

Mueller’s monograph makes novel contributions to several strands of the literature. First, she further develops and then applies social movement scholarship to sub-Saharan Africa – a region hitherto mostly neglected by students of such movements. Further, she re-establishes class analysis of African societies among a scientific community that largely denies that such affinities play a significant role on the continent. Her argument for situating the current protests in the contemporary political and economic contexts, alongside comparing current protest waves with earlier movements, are particularly novel and innovative. Mueller’s micro-analyses of protest movements in Senegal and Niger are a further source of credit.

Protest leaders stem usually from a communicative profession – being, for example, musicians – and know how to use the media for their purposes (80, 82). Mueller demonstrates that the Western media was eager to portray some of the movements of the last protest wave only as ones for political reform (107), whereas protests also addressed lower-class issues. This questions the Western narrative that grasps current protests as civil society uprisings against a “predatory” state. It offers a conceptually fresh look at which classes mobilise, and for what purposes. The author’s second major contribution is thus to the growing literature on the middle class in Africa. It offers a glimpse into the behaviour of the continent’s middle class in the political context, and their learning processes when it comes to pursuing their interests.

Some issues remain, nonetheless, unaddressed. Why low expectations of upward mobility in some cases do not lead to protests whereas in other countries they appear to spark them remains a question worthy of further inquiry. In her concluding chapter, Mueller's evidence for her deprivation and ethnic hypotheses seems to be ultimately more mixed than expected. Further in-depth studies that situate the protest movements in their historical context would be highly desirable, to see whether the factors that Mueller identified for protest mobilisation are also relevant therein too.

Mueller's recommendations pose some serious issues. If the majority of protesters are deeply troubled by economic problems, formulating recommendations for political reform and not looking into economic policy seems out of place. Mueller's underlying assumption is that once the middle class is financially better equipped and trained, and thus can better mobilise people, most of the political and economic problems of African states will be resolved. The protest leaders might even be "sincere democrats who use their economic privileges to pursue a more just system of government" (72) – a grasp of the middle class which runs counter, then, to her general rational-choice approach thereto. Ultimately, however, the question is what the outcomes of the third protest wave have actually been. Mueller does approach this subject, but addresses it only insufficiently. So far, the current protests resemble more bourgeois revolutions than social transformations.

Students of social movements, democratisation, as well as readers interested in West Africa will find this book particularly appealing.

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